

Rambling about power, fate and entropy

Tsang Shu-ki (17/2/2003)

*The emperor without clothes?* So the US is regarded by some of its proud conservatives as the uncontested superpower of the world, as strong as the Roman Empire once was. In terms of “hard power”, it undoubtedly is. But the Roman Empire was also a remarkable example of “soft power”, to use the terms of Joseph Nye, the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government of the Harvard University. The Roman Empire, in its heyday at least, was admired as well as feared. But in the words of a domestic critic, the present Republican Administration appears to have united the world ..... against it. And does George W. Bush look, talk and act like a Julius Caesar?

In any case, just as the conservative leadership starts to act like the commanders of a Roman Empire (pronounced unilaterally and arrogantly), it is “surprisingly” challenged by some of its closest allies. The gridlock over military actions in Iraq is the most blatant example. France, inevitable. But Germany? And the rapidly spreading anti-Americanism within the intellectual circle and among the public in Europe? Not to say in the Middle East and other parts of the world? In poll after poll? What about the worldwide anti-war demonstrations last Saturday?

And North Korea’s defiance? The Bush Administration is obviously applying double standards. Just because the one million soldiers on the north of the border could flatten Seoul in a matter of days if not hours, should Kim Jong Il care less about costs (he is not noted for that concern)?

So who is more powerful? Remember the saying that if you owe the bank a thousand pounds you are its slave. But if you owe it a million pounds, it is your slave. (Please adjust for inflation appropriately, as it is a rather old saying.)

Who is more powerful? The villains who have chemical and biological weapons that could wreck havoc in a few cities but who are not deterred by death (who actually glorify death)? Or the superpower which has enough nuclear ammunitions to destroy the whole world many times over, but which is afraid of large civilian casualty (of its own, of course)?

Does the Emperor really have clothes on?

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*The burden of proof.* I have no intention of being apologetic about Iraq. Saddam Hussein's own record speaks for itself. Moreover, having a first degree in philosophy and political science, I will not be so naive as to rule out war as a means of "conflict resolution" although peace is obviously a better choice. Certainly, there are just and unjust wars. And as Sun Zi said, winning without going to battle is always a superior strategy.

But also because of that training, one question really puzzles me. How does one prove that one does not have something? It is absolutely easy the other way round: show it and period. But suppose, just suppose, that I don't have marijuana, and someone accuses me of possessing and hiding it. How on earth could I establish my innocence? Who bears the burden of proof?

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*The turn of fortune.* One lesson about life that I've learnt over the years is how cruel fate or fame can be. The most glorious moment in life could exactly be the beginning of a precipitous fall. I still remember that when I was very young, there was a local pop group of two "sisters", who managed to sweep almost every prize for singers in a certain year. Then they decided unwittingly to maximise their fame and fortune by starring in a quickie movie (made probably in two weeks' time), in which they sang and sang. Unfortunately, the reception was so poor that the film was taken off screen by most cinemas in the afternoon of the second day after launch. Since then I had hardly heard of them. The lesson: they didn't know that people were so bored of them because they had almost no competitors!

If the above lesson reminds you of the US or Japan (as potential "number one" and then rapidly as the counter-example of economic success), I have an ominous feeling about another place: Hong Kong.

In the bubble economy of the pre-1997 years, many of my friends and people that I knew became multi-millionaires, on paper at least. What did they do? Well, they just bought units of property and loads of stock shares. Some of the high-class residential units were fetching the unit prices of over HK\$10,000/sq.ft. (My own humble home was for a brief time having a "market" value of over HK\$8 million. I was so foolish as not to have sold it; but clever enough not to have followed their suit. Anyway I

didn't have the money, or more precisely the margin.)

Hong Kong was booming; and most seemed so happy. Then came the bust. Sudden, unanticipated, and ruthless. The East Asian financial crisis was followed by a double-dip in GDP; and now a structural fiscal deficit which few, the HKSARG excepting, expect to be balanced in the foreseeable future. Equivalents of my poor little hideaway are selling just over HK\$2 million.

Among the multi-millionaires whom I know, a few went bankrupt; even fewer got psychosis. Most just fell silent, like the two "sister" singers. They simply didn't want to talk about "what if".

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*Entropy in the HKSAR?* Personal misfortune notwithstanding, Hong Kong seems to be suffering from a social anomie. A foreign friend told me the other day that he couldn't find a political leader in the world as abused by the media and the populace as Mr. Tung Chee Hwa. True. In an authoritarian regime, people dare not criticise. In a parliamentary democracy, the ruling party at least has some support and the opposition is more inhibited by the rule of the game.

Hong Kong is unfortunately locked in a half-baked "semi-democracy" faultily designed, and governed by an increasingly inept leadership. Under the "executive-led" political system, people have few ways to ventilate their misgivings and anger about the economic avalanche besides scolding and insulting the top echelon of the government. With power but little local political support, the latter has reacted by behaving almost randomly. Ideas rambled from "long-term planning" to "proactive market enabling" to "big market, small government"; swayed between "Hong Kong as Asia's World City" and "Hong Kong as the Dragon Head of the Pearl River Delta", and hesitated in facing high-technology innovation and "local community economy". Meanwhile very little has been effectively done!

Now the political leadership is showing signs of entropy. Mr. Tung emphasized the importance of restoring competitiveness by cost and wage adjustments (in lieu of a change in the exchange rate), while one of his ministers produced the "nine measures" to "stabilise" property prices (actually to move them slightly up, if possible). Grateful property tycoons even admitted that only five or seven of those largely administrative measures would have been fine.

Mr. Tung basically wrote his own Policy Address (with the help of a few aides). He talked about the need for Hong Kong to become a knowledge-intensive economy, and the determination to put investments into education, but another of his ministers quickly proceeded to plan possible deep cuts in university and post-secondary funding.

No wonder anti-intellectualism is growing in Hong Kong. If even the government can't put its acts together; or simply utter things consistently, how can one blame the population for being superficial and rude? How can one criticise the lawyers and religious leaders for falling victim to sensationalism and visceral verbiage? (Unfortunately, some of them did.)

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*Death and life.* In the early morning of 27 May 2002, I vomited. It turned out to be blood and jelly-like material. Two days later, the diagnosis came out that I suffered from esophagus cancer. Sudden, unexpected, and ruthless. I had a surgery on 1 June, in which the whole of my esophagus was removed. From late June through July, I received radiotherapy and chemotherapy. I also started to take Chinese herbal medicine. The support from my family and friends and colleagues was overwhelming. It is difficult to describe my gratefulness in words. I never realized that so many people were concerned about me.

Ultimately, though, it was an almost solitary fight. Almost, because my dear wife was always beside me, if not actually physically. When I looked into the mirror last August, I saw a ghost-like face. Then I confronted a "scare" in October, when the results of PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scan indicated a relapse; and one doctor spelt out a possible implication: I had six to eighteen months. I went through the deepest soul searching in my life, and gained four pounds in a month.

I have taken up teaching again since mid-January this year.

I hope I am older but wiser "after" my illness. (The average survival rate of esophagus cancer patients within the first two years is about 30%, though.) One thing I've learnt is that if one is not afraid of death, one lives more happily, which is nevertheless no guarantee of a long life. But taking the risk of being considered perverse, I would say it is the uncertainty of the continuation of life that makes life interesting.

\*\*My literary indirectness has caused concern to caring readers. With gratitude, I should add that the PET scan results turned out to be a false alarm in another test taken last November. As to the future, who knows? (4/3/03)